

The University of Texas at Tyler

HNRS 1352.001/002 – World, Text, and Image 2

Mankind's Search for Meaning and Well-Being

Drs. Stith and Sterken ~ Spring 2026 TR 9:30–10:50a

This course is about the big questions humans have always asked: What is justice? What makes a good life? Why do people suffer? How should we treat one another and the world around us? We will explore these questions through stories, philosophy, discussion, and multimedia, including a shared reading and discussion of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. A major part of the class will be ongoing discussion—listening to one another, asking hard questions, and thinking together about issues that matter today. Rather than focusing only on what the texts say, we will focus on the ideas behind them and how those ideas connect to our own lives, our society, and our responsibilities as human beings.

Dr. Stith's Contact Information:

Office: CAS 127
E-mail: mstith@uttyler.edu
Office Phone: 903.566.7371
Office Hours: TT 11:00-12:30 and by appointment.

Dr. Sterken's Contact Information:

Office: CAS 116
Email: rsterken@uttyler.edu
Office Phone: 903.566.6279
Office Hours: 11a – 5p TT and by appointment.

Course Description (from catalog)

Comparative study in the humanities and social sciences from the Renaissance to the Twenty-First Century. This seminar course takes an interdisciplinary approach to literature, history, and art of this period. This course is writing intensive. Prerequisite: Invitation by Honors Committee. Satisfies core requirement for Language, Philosophy, & Culture.

Student Learning Outcomes

- A. To develop and improve critical thinking and writing skills about ancient and modern versions of the self and the other. (papers and discussions)
- B. To learn how to read critically, analyze, and interpret philosophical texts. (papers and discussions)
- C. To define and study figures of meaning and well-being as conceptualized by the peoples of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. (papers)

D. To differentiate the characteristics of Eastern and Western thought and world views in the Modern Era. (papers and discussions)

Required Texts

1. *The Grapes of Wrath* - January 1, 1939 by John Steinbeck.
2. "Thinking Like a Mountain," by Aldo Leopold (1949) [available on Canvas]
3. "February," by Aldo Leopold (1949) [available on Canvas]
4. "The Work of Local Culture," by Wendell Berry (1988) [available on Canvas]

Please note: to avoid confusion in class, all students must use these editions/translations. Students are required to bring appropriate books to class to supplement discussion.

Assessment of Student Learning

Analytical papers 1 and 2.	25%
Analytical paper 3	25%
Reading Worksheets	30%
Participation and Attendance	10%
Video Presentations of Assigned Readings	10%

Analytical Papers: Thrice during the semester, students will submit a 3 page, double-spaced, 12-point font, type-written essay with 1-inch margins. In these papers, the student will be asked to discuss some aspect of the readings. These papers must have and support a thesis.

Video Presentation Assignment: Intercalary Chapters and the Quest for Meaning in *The Grapes of Wrath*

As we discussed in class, one of the most distinctive formal features of *The Grapes of Wrath* is John Steinbeck's use of intercalary chapters—chapters that step away from the Joad family narrative to offer broader social, moral, and philosophical commentary. These chapters do more than describe historical conditions; they explore fundamental questions about human purpose, dignity, community, and what it means to live a good life.

In this assignment, each student will select one intercalary chapter and create a short video presentation analyzing how that chapter contributes to the novel's exploration of man's quest for meaning and a good life.

Create a 5–7-minute video presentation that offers a focused, analytical interpretation of one intercalary chapter from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Your presentation should explain how the chapter functions within the novel and how it addresses questions of meaning, moral

responsibility, and the possibility of a good life in the face of economic and social dislocation.

This assignment emphasizes interpretation rather than summary. Your goal is to help your peers understand how Steinbeck uses the intercalary chapter to ask—and partially answer—deep philosophical questions.

Your presentation must include the following components:

1. Chapter Identification and Context

Identify the intercalary chapter.

Briefly situate it within the novel's broader narrative and historical context.

2. Central Interpretive Claim

Present a clear, arguable claim about what the chapter suggests about: human meaning and or purpose, dignity, survival, and moral choice, and the conditions necessary for a “good life”

Your claim should address how Steinbeck frames these questions, not merely that he raises them.

3. Close Reading

Analyze one or two key passages closely.

Pay attention to diction, imagery, repetition, tone, and narrative voice.

Explain how Steinbeck's language shapes the reader's understanding of meaning, suffering, or hope.

4. Connection to the Novel as a Whole

Connect the intercalary chapter to the experiences of the Joad family, or another specific scene in the novel where characters confront questions of purpose, solidarity, or moral obligation.

Explain how the intercalary chapter deepens or reframes these moments.

5. Philosophical and Ethical Significance

Address explicitly how the chapter engages with man's quest for meaning and a good life: Does Steinbeck suggest that meaning is found in work, family, faith, community, resistance, or endurance? Does the chapter challenge traditional ideas of success, property, or individualism? Conclude by explaining why this chapter matters to Steinbeck's overall vision of human flourishing.

Presentation Guidelines

Length: 5–7 minutes

Format: Recorded video (slides optional) to be shown in class.

As with last semester, visuals and approach is optional. Short quotations, images, or diagrams that support interpretation.

Strong presentations will:

Advance a thoughtful and original interpretation.

Demonstrate careful close reading.

Engage with moral and philosophical complexity.
Avoid reducing the chapter to a single “lesson.”
Articulate why Steinbeck’s questions remain relevant today.

Presentations will be evaluated on:

- Strength and clarity of the interpretive claim.
- Depth of textual and philosophical analysis.
- Integration of the “quest for meaning” framework.
- Organization, clarity, and delivery.
- Effective use of time and evidence.

Reading Worksheets: There will be nine reading worksheets due throughout the semester. These are meant to help students think carefully and critically about the readings. Each worksheet will consist of two or three guided questions, and no outside sources are allowed. Answers to each question should be approximately 500 words long and should be written in a single paragraph.

Participation: Participation in class means that you are present, engaged in the discussion and not engaged in other activities (do not let your digital device distract you from being fully present). Reading assignments are listed below. All students are expected to have read the assigned material by the beginning of class. Partial completion of an assignment is unacceptable; coming to class unprepared will result in a full letter-grade reduction (10%) of your participation grade. On the other hand, please understand that while we expect you to have read the assigned readings, we do not necessarily expect you to have mastered them. Like all readers, you will have questions and perhaps even occasional problems with these texts. That’s part of the reading process. In such cases, please be sure to bring those problems and questions to class so that we can discuss them as a group. We strongly suggest that you take notes on each text while you read it, focusing on its central ideas, characters, and plot points. Such careful reading will prepare you for discussion, a vital part of this class. Also, be sure to plan. Because of scheduling constraints, reading assignments are not always evenly divided. The participation grade also includes active participation in the group project at the end of the semester.

A note on lateness: Attendance will be noted at the beginning of the class meeting. If you come in late, it is your responsibility to make sure that your name has been recorded on the role. Repeated lateness indicates a lack of respect for your colleagues and professors; to avoid showing such disrespect, please be on time or you may be denied entry.

A note on academic honesty: Any sort of unauthorized aid such as copying or loaning homework assignments, talking or the use of notes during tests or quizzes, will not be tolerated. Plagiarism, the unacknowledged use of another person’s language or ideas, will

not be tolerated. If you cheat on anything in this class, you will receive an “F” for the course. If you are unsure of what constitutes cheating in this class, see the University document at the end of this syllabus. Ignorance of the rules will not be tolerated as an excuse for cheating. AI is not permitted in this course. All work students submit for this course should be their own. Using ChatGPT or any other artificial intelligence (AI) tools for any stages of the work process is expressly forbidden.

A note on the University Writing Center: Located in BUS 202, the UT-Tyler Writing Center provides professional writing tutoring for all students in all disciplines. If you wish to use the Writing Center, you should plan for a minimum of two hour-long tutorials per assignment: the first to provide an initial consultation and drafting plan, and the second to follow up. Be prepared to take an active role in your learning—you will be expected write and/or discuss your work during your tutorial. While Writing Center tutors are happy to provide constructive criticism and teach effective writing techniques, under no circumstances will they fix your paper for you. Appointments: 565-5995. For more information: www.uttyler.edu/writingcenter.

A note on student absence due to religious observance or athletics. Any student who will miss any class days during the semester because of religious observance or participation in university athletics must inform the instructors of this course no later than the second day of class.

Schedule of Discussion of Readings

(Please note: This schedule is subject to revision)

Please see the "Assignments" or the "Modules" tabs for details of each course assignment.

January: Grapes of Wrath

Week 1 —Crisis Without Characters

Read: Chs. 1–3

Focus: Intercalary method; environment as force

Key topics

- Dust Bowl as ecological + political disaster
- Why Steinbeck begins without people
- Narrative voice and authority

Class Discussion Questions

- What kind of “argument” is Chapter 1 making?
- How does the turtle chapter model Steinbeck’s ethics?

Week 2 — Law, Land, and Displacement

Read: Chs. 4–6

Focus: Property, punishment, moral responsibility

Key topics

- Tom Joad and parole
- Land ownership vs. land use
- The tension between legality and justice

Class Discussion Questions

- Is Tom morally changed by prison?
- Who owns the land — legally, morally, historically?

Week 3 — The Bank as Monster

Read: Chs. 7–9

Focus: Capital, abstraction, power

Key topics

- Banks as impersonal systems
- Dehumanization through economic language

Class Discussion Questions

- Why does Steinbeck describe banks as “monsters”?
- Is this metaphor persuasive or simplistic?

February: *Grapes of Wrath*

Week 4 — Migration and American Myth

Read: Chs. 10–12

Focus: Journey narrative; American mobility

Key topics

- Route 66 as modern epic road
- Family as social unit
- Hope vs. illusion

Activity

- Map the Joads' route alongside emotional turning points

Class Discussion Questions

- Is migration presented as choice or compulsion?
- How does Steinbeck revise the frontier myth?

Week 5 — Community Under Pressure

Read: Chs. 13–15

Focus: Solidarity, fear, scarcity

Key topics

- Hoovervilles
- Suspicion of outsiders
- Breakdown of hospitality

Class Discussion Questions

- Why does fear produce cruelty in these chapters?
- What social norms collapse first?

Week 6 — Power, Order, and the State

Read: Chs. 16–18

Focus: Governance, dignity, labor control

Key topics

- Weedpatch camp vs. private camps.
- Policing, violence, and order.
- Collective self-governance.

Week 7 — The “We” Voice

Read: Chs. 19–21

Focus: Collective identity

Key topics

- Shift from “I” to “we”
- Radical empathy
- Class consciousness

Class Discussion Question

- What does the “we” make possible that individuals cannot?

March: The Grapes of Wrath

Week 8 — Religion, Sacrifice, and Radical Ethics.

Read: Chs. 22–26

Focus: Jim Casy; martyrdom; moral authority

Supplemental texts

- Biblical Exodus (short excerpts).
- Contemporary critiques of Steinbeck?

Class Discussion Questions

- Is Casy a Christ figure, or something else?
- Does Steinbeck endorse sacrifice — or expose its cost?

Week 9 — Ending and Meaning

Read: Chs. 27–30

Focus: Ambiguity, hope, discomfort.

Key topics

- Collapse of the family unit.
- Rose of Sharon’s final act.
- Earned or manipulative ending?

Class Discussion Questions

- Is the final scene ethical, symbolic, or coercive?
- Why does Steinbeck deny narrative closure?

Week 10 — Legacy and Relevance

Focus: Reception, censorship, modern parallels

Topics

- Why was the novel banned?
- Climate migration comparisons.
- Literature as social intervention.

Spring Break! (3-9/3-13): Spring Break!

April: Nature and Philosophy

Week 11 : “Thinking Like a Mountain,” by Aldo Leopold (1949) [available on Canvas]

Week 12 : “February,” by Aldo Leopold (1949) [available on Canvas]

Week 13 : “The Work of Local Culture,” by Wendell Berry (1988) [available on Canvas]

Week 14 : Video Presentations

Week 15 (4-28/5-2): Finals Week; Final Essay Due at 11:59pm on May 2.